

Statement of Senator Larry E. Craig
Senate Special Committee on Aging
July 28, 2003

Good Morning. I wish to thank Senator Breaux and his ranking committee staff for putting together this most important hearing on Senior Depression: Life-Saving Mental health Treatments for Older Americans. This hearing is a most important step in bringing awareness of a mental affliction that affects so many Americans, especially our elder seniors who have given so much in the building and maintaining of our country's well-being all their lives and who, now, for a variety of reasons suffer from this terrible form of mental illness.

I note that nationally speaking while senior comprise nearly 13% of the population their suicide rate comprise nearly 20% of those of our citizens who commit suicide. We know that intense or prolonged feelings of unhappiness can be a signal of depression. Seniors are especially susceptible to depression because of the range of life events including physical illness, isolation, chronic pain and bereavement.

Often times depression can be mistaken for physical illness because the symptoms are thought to be age-related. For example sleep problems and lower energy levels are a good indication of depression in the elderly and are not just the side effects of getting older as commonly believed.

While diagnosis methods for depression exists, including physical examination, tests to rule out physical causes and psychological tests, ordinary treating primary physicians have little or no schooling or training in this regard.

I hope that the distinguished witnesses testimonies today will shine light on the various underlying factors involved in depression and their relation to elder suicide. I look forward to their ideas as to how they believe the Congress can best address these issues affecting our senior citizens.

I thank these witnesses for taking the time and making the effort to be here this morning and I especially thank you, Senator Breaux, for helping to focus this Committee's attention on this all too historically neglected, but most important mental health issue affecting our senior citizens.